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ABSTRACT

Designing a curriculum to introduce freshman composition students to computer assisted composition involves the cooperation of the composition instructor and the writing center director. One college has developed such a curriculum using the "Milliken Word Processor" (Milliken Publishing Company), a simple program with a variety of composing, revising, and printing options. An instruction sheet outlining the main functions of the software program and basics of computer use is distributed to allay students' computer anxiety. Instruction takes place in two phases: familiarizing students with the functions of the computer and of the word processing program, and teaching them the processes of computer assisted revision. Thus, the first assignments are extremely simple, moving from paragraph writing to simple revision, and with access to the instructor or the writing center director as needed. After several weeks of practice, students are given copies of "What Can You Do When You Revise?" and practice each of the listed skills. Students are required to subscribe to a weekly news magazine, which becomes the basis of subsequent writing assignments. By midsemester, students are proficient enough to write and revise a fairly lengthy piece. On a questionnaire completed at the end of the semester, most students indicate that use of the word processor has increased their writing abilities greatly. (HTH)

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EMPHASIZING REVISION WITH WORD PROCESSING IN FRESHMAN ENGLISH CLASSES

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Recently I requested a copy of a paper presented by a colleage at a conference on composition and computers. Reviewing the paper, I was surprised and not a little envious to learn that my colleague's composition students had arrived in his class already knowledgeable about the functioning and uses of computers and word processors.

My composition students, and perhaps yours, are quite different. A survey on the first day of class revealed that only two of twenty-three freshmen had previously used a computer for academic purposes (although nearly all the students admitted that they had annihilated zillions of alien invaders on computerized games). The survey also showed that only five of the twenty-three freshmen possessed even minimal typing skills. And twenty-two of the twenty-three students said they were apprehensive about trusting their writing to a machine.

Although for teaching purposes I have access to 27 Apple computers in a centrally located writing center, I still must overcome the students' computer-knowledge gap. Teaching students to process words requires a careful introduction to both the workings of the computer and to the computer's revising capabilities. Designing a curriculum to introduce beginning writers to the word processor is a task which

involves the best cooperative efforts of those responsible for the instruction -- the writing center director and the composition instructor.

To minimize the teaching and learning problems of our beginning students, we selected the Milliken Word Processor (Milliken Publishing Company), a program simple enough for elementary school students to use, but one which permits the user a variety of composing, revising, and printing options. Alternative programs of this same simplified type include Bank Street Writer (Broderbund Software, Inc.), Letter Perfect (LJK Enterprises, Inc.), Letter-Writer (Astro-Star Enterprises), and The Write Stuff (Harper & Row Electronic and Technical Publishing).

As instruction began, the most immediate problem was to persuade the students that their slightest touch on a computer keyboard would not cause the machine to self-destruct. "I know I'll break it!" the students chorused. "What'll I do if something cracks and falls off?" To alleviate such fears, we distributed copies of an instruction sheet which outlined the main functions of the software program and instructed the students in basics of computer use, including such information as the location of the disk drive and the limited use of the "return" key in word processing. After a one-hour orientation in our classroom, during which I guided students in demonstrating to their peers the word processing program on a portable

terminal and monitor, the computer-destruction myth was itself destroyed, and we moved on to other problems and solutions.

One of those problems involved the students' attempts at revision. As many researchers have learned, a primary advantage of using word processors to teach writing is that the revision processes are greatly simplified. Yet a student who is beginning to work with what seems to be a technologically mysterious machine is concentrating so hard on pushing the right buttons that she has little patience for the niceties of insertion, deletion, rephrasing, moving text, and other transformations of her written drafts into the kind of prose that a writing teacher or any other audience would enjoy reading.

My experience showed that introducing beginners to word processing requires that the instruction take place on two separate planes. Both the writing center director and the instructor need to become familiar with these instructional modes in order to reinforce the students' learning from its beginning through stages of gradually increasing competence. One plane of teaching involves familiarizing the student with the functions of the computer and of the word processing program, letting the student grow comfortable with the many activities possible while he is writing and printing what he has composed. The second plane of

instruction focuses on the processes of computer-assisted revision.

By separating and concentrating on these two planes of teaching early in the academic session, the teacher or writing center director may more readily assure that students quickly overcome their apprehension about using an electronic pencil and eraser, while simultaneously acquiring the skills necessary to shape their writing into its desired final form.

To work on such separate planes of learning, the students were given extremely simple writing assignments immediately following their orientation to the word processing program. The first assignment said only this: "Write a paragraph or two of at least 200 words on any topic you like. File the paragraph under the title PARA 1. Print PARA 1."

Here the student's choices were minimal; her only problem was deciding what to write about. The length of the work was sufficient to give her some real practice with the keyboard without intimidating her, particularly if her typing skills were scanty. Even the name under which she was to file her first draft was specified to avoid confusing her with computer-talk about the ways in which she could designate a first draft with a name and number, a second draft with the same name but another number, and so on.

The next part of the first word processing assignment encouraged the student to begin revising, but without pressuring him to accomplish major changes. The assignment said,

> "Now revise PARA 1, practicing as many of the following skills as are appropriate for your paragraph:
> 1. Add information (letters to correct spelling, words, whole sentences to clarify your meaning);
> 2. Delete information (letters to correct spelling, words, whole sentences if necessary);
> 3. Move information (words, sentences, whole paragraphs). File the revision under the title PARA 2 (leaving PARA 1 as it is in your file).
> Print PARA 2. Bring both paragraphs to class."

While the students were working on these assignments in the writing center, they were provided constant access to either the teacher or the writing center director; these persons did not interact with the students unless asked, but remained available in case students needed help. The presence of an informed guide in the writing center is very important; when students are first becoming acclimated to composing on a strange machine, they prefer having a familiar person to ask questions of and to complain directly to, someone who seems to have the writing know-how and the computer expertise which the students want to gain. If writing teachers and directors will just recall how they felt the first time they sat down in front of a computer console, they will have more sympathy for the uncertainties and apprehensions which many of the students are suffering.

For the freshmen, the first writing assignments were not timed, in order not to penalize those with minimal typing skills. Students were allowed as long as four days to complete writing PARA 1 and PARA 2, though most finished the task in a couple of hours. Back in the classroom, students exchanged their first and second drafts, noting exactly what changes had been made by revising and what clarification or improvement those changes produced in the text. During class discussion we reviewed the computer procedures required to effect those changes, thereby reassuring every class member that such revisions were not only desirable, but attainable.

After several weeks of practice on the word processor, the students were given copies "What Can You Do When You Revise?" Using student-written samples, the class practiced each of the listed skills separately and in combination, with class members sometimes writing alone and sometimes sharing ideas in peer-evaluation groups. The purpose of such extensive practice was to familiarize students with revision techniques accomplished apart from the word processor so that, knowing both the advantages and the messiness of manual revision, students would feel positive about using the word processor to effect even more extensive and certainly much neater revisions in their written work.

Instead of using a book of selected readings, I required students to subscribe to a weekly news magazine at a special student rate. While we were learning and

practicing revision skills, I assigned the students to fulfill specific writing assignments on the word processors. The assignments were chosen to cover a variety of topics, ranging from politics and music to education and sports, so that students would find personal involvement in at least some of the work. Further, the assignments required a variety of written responses: some asked for lists, others for thesis-and-proof plans, still others for sentences or paragraphs of explanation, comparison, argumentation, description, and summary. These writing assignments drew the student writers into shaping their work in various ways so that they would be better able to apply their skills to writing done later for academic and personal purposes. It seems inefficient to teach students to write only lengthy essays when much of the writing they will need to do will be of widely varied kinds.

By mid-term the students had gained enough proficiency with the word processor so that most were able to write and revise a fairly lengthy piece of work in two or three hours, although they were permitted additional time if they needed it. They were also permitted to write their work by hand if they wanted to do so; however, very few, even the slow typists, chose to write manually. Their preference for the word processor showed their belief that their work would be more successful if they took advantage of the processor's easy revising capabilities. The writing center director

helped by advising the students of the hours during which the writing center was least busy so that they would have freer access to word processors and guidance.

At the end of the term, the students completed an anonymously-written questionnaire designed to determine some of their perceptions about using the word processor. Of the twenty-one novices to word processing, one said his writing skills had increased a little; four said their skill had increased moderately; and sixteen asserted that their writing abilities had increased greatly. Eighteen of the twenty-three class members said they planned to use the word processor in preparing future coursework and personal writing. Though the grades earned in the class were no higher than those my students normally earn -- most of the students earned C's -- the students' responses show that the majority perceived word processing as beneficial to their writing.

The students also made complaints on the questionnaire. Several students resented having to share the writing center computers and the director with students in other disciplines, apparently feeling that their own work transcended other assignments in importance and urgency. One person felt that he should be trusted to boot the word processing program by himself, instead of having to rely on the center director or someone else to perform that service for him. His desire for independence appeared to be a

positive sign that, as a writer, he was stretching toward the independence of self-evaluation which writing teachers everywhere would like to instill in their students.

These negative comments, however, bear little weight when compared to the immensely positive attitudes of students who, at the beginning of the quarter, had stared suspiciously at the computer and wondered if they would damage it beyond repair. Cooperative instruction in the writing center, as well as providing step-by-step instruction and extensive practice in manual and machine revision, helped move a class of beginners toward increased writing competence.

WHAT CAN YOU DO WHEN YOU REVISE?

-- Find your main idea and your supporting ideas. Be sure you have provided enough detail about each topic sentence to let your reader understand it fully. Wherever you need to ADD information, do so, concentrating especially on reasons, results, and examples.

-- If you have repeated any ideas, combine or delete wordy material.

-- If any sentences are too short but focus on the same idea, combine the sentences to make one well subordinated sentence.

-- Check word by word to find the kinds of errors you often make (spelling, punctuation, and mechanics). If you tend to make lots of errors, do lots of checking.

-- Review sentences to make sure you have varied the beginnings.

-- If you can think of a more exact word or phrase, substitute it for an inexact expression.

-- If you have used a word too often, make changes.

-- If your strongest proof is not last, move it so that it is.

-- If sentences are out of order anywhere in the paper, move them into correct order.

-- If you need transitional expressions at the beginnings of paragraphs or within paragraphs, add them.

-- In a final re-reading, pretend that you are the reader and have never seen the paper before. Do you completely understand what is being said? If not, make changes until you do!